

Chaos and hope: nano-utopian moments of activist self-organisation

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“ Arguably, **chaos** and entropy are adaptive to activism and utopian theory; they trouble normative approaches to temporal progress, applying a non-linear and emergent approach to thinking about activism and possibility. [...] This initial exploratory definition of the nano-utopian describes moments that are fractions of [...] micro-utopian structures, or that may initially sit at a disconnect from them, differing mainly in the fact that they are unpredictable, unplanned or unexpected. ”

Introduction

This article presents the idea of a nano-utopian moment as a mode of utopian analysis for spontaneously arising acts of resistance. First, it introduces Ernst Bloch's concept of utopia as a disruptive process (1995), one that is forward-facing and aims to create a better world. This theory contains within it the normative assumption that a better world is possible given the right conditions, but that this must also be an unclosed system of ongoing critique. The article then looks at some of the existing theories on modes of process-based activist utopias, exploring how these arguments are productive in developing the field of activist utopian studies. These micro-utopias mainly describe events and projects that are small, planned resistances and social

experiments. However, there is scope to examine further descriptions of brief and unexpected utopian moments that may happen within, as a result of, or that are generative of the order and planning that lead to these micro-utopias.

Building on this, the new nano-utopian category aims to describe unplanned or spontaneous activist moments, viewing them as accelerated processes of self-organisation that appear to arise out of chaotic situations or breakdown. It draws on the work of Prigogine and Stengers (1984) that note how under certain circumstances “entropy itself becomes the progenitor of order”. Likewise, the nano-utopian moment while disrupting one system has within it the possibility (not a certainty) of creating a “higher level” of order, i.e., an order which reaches towards a new horizon of hope for a fairer ordering of the world for the participants. Finally, the article looks at an example of nano-utopian activism: the initiation of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014. The movement, where student protestors were holding up umbrellas to protect themselves from teargas, went viral on social media, triggering massive spontaneous self-organisation (Cheng and Chan, 2017).

Utopia as Process

For some, the idea of utopia may bring to mind some perfect place, isolated, impossible, and idyllic, perhaps the opposite of chaotic and disruptive activism. However, interpretations of utopia in modern utopian studies have been refocussed into something more critical and focused on present interventions (Moylan and Baccolini, 2007; Levitas, 2013; Bell, 2017; Sargisson, 2002). Ernst Bloch (1995, 2000), regarded as a central figure in the critical utopian studies, views utopia not as a permanent and abstract place, but a process that takes place in the material world hoping to make it a better place. This process-based utopia originates in a critique of the now; grounded in praxis, and the ethics of collectivist action.

Bloch's ideas strive against what Wright (2010) describes as the common fantasy that “[i]f only we can design institutions in the perfect manner we can relax.” (p. 369). The process of critique is a constant process of opening up and moving towards better horizons, driven by conflict, critique, disruption and failure (Bloch, 1995). Wright notes “[w]e can never relax” (2010, p. 370); to strive for a better world is a process in motion and an unpredictable one. Moving towards uncertainty is a concern when reimagining. However, Cooper (2019) notes this can open up new terrains and ways of working which can advance reactionary or oppressive agendas as well as progressive or liberating ones, since positive change towards a more just society reveals new inequalities, challenges, and possibilities. We move in “the darkness of the lived moment” where uncertainty, unknown outcomes, and the risk of higher entropy out of the new order, is a part of this critical utopian process (Bloch, 1995). In the process, we must avoid slipping from “creativity to conformity” and into abstraction (Daly, 2013, p. 164) and avoid the trap of maintaining status quo, replicating existing structures of oppression or “a new path into the old, certain reality” (Bloch, 1995, p. 203). Bloch’s temporality engages with the time as the “creative epistemology of the possible”, both destructive and creative (McManus, 2003), and provides an open model of reality that recognises the uncertain and open character of history, suggested and scientifically supported by the work of Prigogine and Stengers (1984).

Modes of Micro-Utopian Theory in Activist Praxis

Using utopian theory to look at different activist and material practices has a rich history that has emerged from the study of utopian literature. Utopian literature, particularly that which offers a deconstruction of temporal politics, “offers its readers a crucial window in the experience of lived time; something that adds to, and can not be replaced by queer activism, politics and other discursive and political forms” (Edwards, 2019, p. 67). Many

utopian theorists mention micro-utopias within the fictive realm, in particular concerning feminist utopias (see also Pohl, 2006; Tooley, 2016; Runte, 1994).

Davina Cooper's concept of *Everyday Utopias* (2013), for example, considers how feminist spaces of alterity can emphasise what is “doable and viable considering the conditions of the present” (p. 31). She uses these spaces as a way to explore social alternatives to doing and being through practice rather than imagination. Exposing these concrete ideas and their potential has the effect of making the impossible possible since “[m]aking progressive developments visible is an important aspect of modelling and inspiring change” (ibid). Such *Everyday Utopias* “perform quotidian acts of governance, appearing in public, having sex, trading, learning and challenging in inventive ways” these are not “flash in the pan” but socially experimental practices (p. 218).

Looking at small instances of hopeful change, Olin Wright (2010), in turn, investigates how to practically build and sustain utopian communities which can counter cynicism, inspire change, and purposefully place alternative narratives on the historical agenda. Wright's utopian communities are not producing whole world views. They are alternative systems of governance and economics, aiming to create fairer ways of living and being. This highlights strategic indeterminacy; there is no one way of social change towards “radical egalitarian ideas of social and political justice” (p. 370). Examining different logics that increase transformation towards such a new social order, he suggests there is an opacity to possibility, that we do not know how far we can go towards such goals.

John Wood (2016) focuses on designing micro-utopias, while his concept of them considers the flow and moves away from a static idea of the natural world, an open and interconnected co-sustainable approach to design in the modern world. This notion of micro-utopias seeks “new ways of living that compensate for the suicidal tendencies of our species” (p. 130)

and emphasises the importance of dreaming and visioning. He distinguishes planned utopias and those that are serendipitous, and how a network of inter-dependant micro-utopias may be a future vision. Networks of practical micro-utopias provide an alternative to a totalising blueprints approach (Bourriaud, 1998; Wood, 2016).

Finally, Carol Becker (1991) draws on a Blochian approach to utopia when she speaks of the creation of micro-utopian communities as small solutions to bigger problems. She uses the term to explore ephemeral artistic interventions as ways to “dream back communities” through carefully planned interventions in public spaces. The public square or agora is not the micro-utopia, but a site which is necessary for public engagement, where she believes micro-utopian acts should happen. She speaks of how “projects function as micro-utopian environments that might only last for a short time, but that are nonetheless essential to the development of consciousness and to how we envision our future” (Becker, 2020). Such disruptive environmental events can lead to exploring new ideas. Her examples of artistic interventions include eroding statues and rehearsed events such as flash mobs, staged events and planned interruptions (Becker, 1991). These planned events disrupt the norms by bringing changes to light rather than emerging spontaneously.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of examinations of the micro-utopian dynamic. However, the commonality of these systems is planned activities, communities, or design processes that pull against the current systems of order, that contain uncertainty. They aim not to create disarray but micro-orders within these systems, with the hope to generate knowledge and communities that may aid a further process of social change. This idea of micro-instances of utopian action has many differing approaches already in play; these allow for divergent approaches to utopias that are not an overarching blueprint. Such methods are advantageous as they can help resist colonial utopian narratives which (re)produce gender norms,

patriarchy and white-supremacy (Bell, 2017). Micro-utopias do not necessarily aim to change things unilaterally on a global scale as European utopianism has historically sought to do and can be more akin to indigenous utopias described by Darian Smith which “do not assume singular ethical or moral visions that are applicable to everyone” (Darian-Smith, 2016, p. 178).

The new category of nano-utopia does not aim to negate the literary form by starting with the material activism but joins a process of utopian opening to demonstrate we can get to the utopian process from many angles. The aim is to centre "activism and utopianism as mutually constitutive concept[s][...] an extended process of opening out: starting with localised micro-instances of utopian action, moving through the utopian representations and political possibilities located in poetic expression, and on to explorations of real-world activist struggles on national and planetary scales" (Stone and Kabo, 2019, p. 2).

The micro-utopian approach that inspires the nano-utopian moment does not assume there is one approach either. There are many unexpected paths, many fractured utopian moments; it supports the above move towards multiple singular moments that are fragmentary, grassroots and dispersive rather than domineering.

The Utopian Potential of Chaos and Entropy

Arguably, chaos and entropy are adaptive to activism and utopian theory; they trouble normative approaches to temporal progress, applying a non-linear and emergent approach to thinking about activism and possibility. Using entropy to explore resistance in the Summer Riots of London 2011, for example, Lucy Finchett-Maddock (2012) notes how entropy is “readily adaptable to describing phenomena outside its traditional subject areas” (p. 200). She uses the work of Prigogine and Stengers to explore these connections in the analysis of activism and environmental legal pedagogy, arguing “entropy has found its way back into the social sciences, humanities

and indeed aesthetic theory” (pp. 203–204). She also notes that Boaventura de Sousa Santos combines the utopian theory of Bloch with that of chaos (Finchett-Maddock, 2017): “[C]haos invites us to a praxis that insists on immediate effects, and warns against distant effects, a style of action that privileges a transparent, localised connection between the action and its consequences” (Santos, 1995, p. 26). This theory, while not mentioning the micro-utopian, links praxis and chaos with the idea of localised projects and ethical drives. Bloch’s utopian theory is an ever-opening process and rails against Eugenio Battisti’s concerns that “[t]he obstacle is that the doors are too open, and we lack the instinct that pushes us to escape in one direction rather than another. We are, in effect, revolving round a void” (Battisti, 1998, p. 151). Instead, openness and chaos create motion, stirrings, and connections that lead to the conditions for a spontaneous outburst towards a new ethical order.

In *Order Out of Chaos*, Prigogine and Stengers (1984) aim to show how determinism and chance operate together. The theory they present resists popular models of capitalist progress and optimisation, hoping to use science to restore the open character of history by accepting its fundamental uncertainty. They state that “entropy is not merely a downward slide into disorganisation. Under certain circumstances, entropy itself becomes the progenitor of order” (Toffler in Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. xxi). While traditionally irreversibility is associated with an increase of entropy, Prigogine and Stengers note that “[w]e must accept a pluralistic world in which reversible and irreversible processes coexist” (pp. 257, 259), pushing for the recognition of a multi-directional, open and uncertain understanding of reality. By introducing the unexpected ideal of the reversible (as opposed to the irreversibility of the idea that there is no alternative), they challenge the notion that we have passed the point of no return. Their work aims to shine a light on the possibilities of scientific and social revolution and transformation.

The nano-utopian category uses this idea to add to current utopian discourse where we find ourselves in times of notable change and dissolution of old comfortable dynamics and temporalities. For example, we may consider some of these to be the traditionally opposing temporal mindsets of the conservative and progressive. Emily Robinson (2017) notes this political division of conservative and progressive mindsets no longer stands as “progressive views of both time in general and parliamentary politics, in particular, have become so dominant that they have either subsumed or silenced other possible temporalities” (p. 268). Robinson argues for a politics based on the queer theories of the temporality of the present moment, noting “[t]here are potentially radical implications for feminist, queer, racial and ecological politics [...] simply framing this as a debate about the common good in the present, rather than as an encounter with the impersonal and inevitable ‘forces of progress’, could enable a different kind of political conversation... [and] create space for something genuinely new.” (p. 289). Addressing such politics in *Everyday Utopias*, Cooper (2013) stresses the difficulties “of moving from dreams to practice.... [of] shaping and directing the process of change”, as well as “the political implications of a far more contingent and uncertain political move ‘forward’... [and a] radically revised view of time and change in which the future is no longer solidly and predictably connected to the present but erupts suddenly without notice” (pp. 219-220).

The nano-utopian category, then, focusses on eruptions and radical moments of micro-utopian examinations. It aims to challenge how we think about progress from a particular temporal and political perspective, that is interdisciplinary and material. It connects with the Blochian notion of a pre-consciousness, the presence of the potential future in the now. Bloch (1995) finds the concept of the 'unconscious' as the only mental life other than consciousness limiting and inaccurate. The unconsciousness only suggests what has fallen away from the conscious world, beneath the threshold of our

perception. In a temporal sense, something that was there that is now gone, if it re-emerges in our threshold of perception, it only does so from the past. It does not include the new that is rising up from within ourselves, which is transitory and forward reaching. Nano-utopia invites us to look into the utopian imaginary of the spontaneous where things appear almost unthought; an unexpected pre-conscious emergence, which is unplanned, its entangled roots are seen only in retrospect.

The Nano-Utopian Moment

The micro-utopias above describe and examine the micro-level as small, often temporary, planned or slowly emergent utopias from generally expected places; the nano-utopian is a rupture from this. The nano-utopian may be emergent from the micro-utopian and may signal their initiating points, ends or transitions. However, they do not hold space in the same way or share the same planned anticipation. For example, Becker (1991) describes “the political upheaval in Egypt – a micro-utopian moment organised via cell phones and social media... [an] elaborately documented process that took years to manifest” (p. 66). She is referring to the revolution against President Hosni Mubarak, which consisted of 18 days of demonstrations, marches, occupations, acts of civil disobedience and strikes, as well as non-violent civil resistance (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Joya, 2011). However, she also notes the particular instant at Tahrir Square, which was a “final transformation” requiring a public moment to occur when people refused to stand down (Becker, 1991, p. 66).

The success of the Tahrir nano-utopian moment was an unplanned eruption out of a larger whole. Initially, the press reporting held back some violence seen elsewhere in the upheaval, but when reporters were banned the international visibility was exacerbated and upscaled by the creation of ‘citizen journalists’ on social media (Joya, 2011; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). Following the government communications blackout, a spontaneous

“analogue equivalent of Twitter: handheld signs held aloft at demonstrations saying where and when people should gather the next day” (Beaumont, 2011). These unexpected and unplanned developments mean we could read this as a nano-utopia within the micro-utopian moment of the broader revolution.

Building on these foundations, this initial exploratory definition of the nano-utopian describes moments that are fractions of the above micro-utopian structures, or that may initially sit at a disconnect from them, differing mainly in the fact that they are unpredictable, unplanned or unexpected. Here the word ‘nano’ is taken somewhat un-mathematically; it is not a billionth of a micro-utopia that makes a nano-utopia. It is a term that is used because of its instantaneous connotations, and because of its futuristic poetics of the small (nano-technology, nano-bots, nano-science) that contain in them entangled ideals and feature in many science fiction literary utopias and dystopias. Its usage is an initial imperfect attempt to capture the feel of some moments of resistance that I have read about or engaged in and not quite had the words for, that have not been planned or clearly imagined before they came into being.

Further to this, I suggest that it involves an emotional surge, whether it be in person or in connection with a past moment that brings us to tears of hope for the future, that gives us a respite from fear. Munoz’s idea is that we must “feel utopia” as well as think it (Duggan and Muñoz, 2009). The purpose of an additional category of nano-utopia is an attempt to solidify that into something political and concrete. It gives us more words with which to play and to lean into and graze the semi-solid walls of science to provide such moments with a claim to validity and embed or reiterate their messages of hope and transformation within. The act of writing on activism brings these moments to the fore and aims to crucially legitimise their legacies, examining what we can hope to learn as we learn to hope.

Here I will discuss three aspects of nano-utopia. First, its spatial-temporality as a ‘singular moment’ which is emergent, unexpected, temporary and accelerated. Second its potential to create a ‘higher level’ of order which is fairer and reaches towards a utopian horizon, which due to its unplanned and unexpected nature may not be as anticipated. Finally, its utopian drive, the emergent politics of a nano-utopian moment as one that reaches for a collective, although not universalising, idea of a better world. I argue that this is necessary and ethical also, that it should be grounded in an ethics of non-violence, mutual recognition of each other’s vulnerabilities, and that there must be a continuous critique of these concepts.

The Singular Moment

The temporality of the nano-utopia is fleeting and dissipative. This relates to the temporality of the moment itself, not the consequences of said event. While it may be part of a more significant movement of events or the catalyst for them (i.e. the start of a new campaign or revolution) it may also just be a one-off event or even a failed attempt to change something. Most importantly, the nano-utopian refers to the temporality of the becoming of the event, not the size of the movement or occurrence.

During the singular moment it is impossible to know whether this will lead to chaos or higher-level order or organisation. The “dissipative structure” is more fragile than the original order since it requires more energy to sustain (Toffler in Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. xv). The idea of the singular moment gives shape to the high unpredictability of the nano-utopian moment when it is “inherently impossible to determine in advance the next state of the system.” (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. xxiii) These are occurrences likely to occur in what are far-from-equilibrium systems when a single fluctuation or combination of fluctuations can become so powerful that they shatter pre-existing organisation.

The aim here is not to claim these moments are somehow removed from a timeline of conditioned origination, that there is no lead-up and that they spontaneously arise from nothing. Instead, this category aims to highlight that they are part of an entanglement of processes that have made the nature of the moment unpredictable. There will be surrounding conditions that anticipate the action, a powder keg scenario of some kind. However, the explosion or dispersal from this may not be as expected, less violent, more profound or completely different.

Within this singular moment, there is a sense of spontaneous or accelerated self-organisation; the order can arise spontaneously out of disorder and chaos in acts of self-organisation. In the nano-utopian moment, the idea to act and participate likely passes from pre-consciousness into the consciousness of participants only slightly before the event, which as such is unlikely to involve strong leadership, rather a collective consensus and movement with non-hierarchical planning. This acceleration is relative to the size of the moment, for example, something that spreads globally could happen more slowly than a small local event because of its scope. The time of the event would still appear accelerated in terms of how fast people have coordinated, in this day and age technologies play their part in compacting time and space. The acceleration of the self-organisation links with what Micah White (2016) describes as the “fast future of activism”, pulling against normal disciplinary structures of time as a unit of measurement linked with power and punitive measures (Foucault, 1991, p. 178). Instead, allowing communities of various forms to reassert themselves as utopian possibilities outside of imposed time.

Higher Level of Order

Nano-utopian moments have the potential to create new ways of being and have the possibility of creating a different and fairer order, in a move towards a better world. The new orders are progenitors, often hard to reverse, and

may not be as anticipated. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) write on the ordering potential of chaos and entropy, describing how “irreversible processes are the source of order” (p. xxi).

Nano-utopian moments can cause some shift or change. They create disruption and new modes of understanding and being, multi-directional processes where “entropy is not merely a downward slide into disorganisation. Under certain circumstances, entropy itself becomes the progenitor of order.” (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. xxi). They may be unintended new orders, and may not be immediately apparent. Looking back to the example in Tahir Square, the chaos of a total communications blackout led to veteran activists from the sixties and seventies stepping forward to advise on pre-digital organising (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). Engaging across generations has had the unanticipated long term impact of restoring pluralist politics to professional associations and has served to increase widespread awareness of the everyday instances of subjugation (Hamzawy and Hamzawy, 2020).

Not always may new ways of being led to what was desirable. As Wright (2010) notes, even with careful planning, there are no guarantees that new structures “could [not] have the effect of reproducing oppressions within civil society rather than eroding them” (p. 369). Bloch notes that failure is often part of the utopian process, even a failed event to change something leaves its mark.

Even when something has completely ceased to be, it does not immediately disappear... The house which has been torn down and has become a thing of the past still clearly occupies the space in which it once stood. (Bloch, 1987, p. 25)

Utopian Drive

Some characteristics of nano-utopia are common in other activist approaches to utopia, such as the utopian impulse or drive. Theorists Cindy Milstein and Ruth Kinna address this by looking at its presence in

anarchism, which is a lived practise based on developing horizontal social relations that have an open-ended prefigurative approach. Milstein (2010) notes that envisioning a non-hierarchical world is a process of prefiguration and self-organisation which retains a utopian impulse, prefigurative politics “practices the new society before it is fully in place” (p. 68). Kinna (2016) highlights the “experimental, productive, and innovative characteristics of anarchist practices” which operate by practising the future as if it is already here.

Similarly, nano-utopias are acts of resistance that anticipate a collective, although not universalising good, and resist regimes of oppression and exploitation. They are doing the work of framing a debate about the common good in the present (Robinson, 2017). The nano-utopia is a critique of the now; it contains the requirements of existing utopian function and is grounded in an ethics of collective action, prefiguration and transformative possibility. Without this ethical framing, we could describe almost any singular movement as nano-utopian. I am proposing that the definition of a nano-utopian moment has a particular politics. There is no abstract claim here to a non-ideological stance for this new category, for I do not believe this would be helpful. To attempt to create an a-political utopian category and deny subscription to a particular ideology would be to fall into the falsifications of such patterns that underpin problematic political patterns of this era noted above by Robinson and Cooper (Robinson, 2017; Cooper, 1998). We must recognise that even science is not a closed independent variable but embedded deeply in societal feedback loops, and is “shaped by cultural relativity to its dominant ideas” (Toffler in Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. xii). Prigogine and Stengers (1984) note that we need to understand time as a scientific concept that “is a construction and therefore carries an ethical responsibility” (p. 312) in terms of how we understand its construction and the ideas that it frames.

In these troubled times, this would involve framing the debate of common good around matters such as ecological issues, anti-war and disarmament campaigns, and anti-colonial and anti-racist work. Those of the emotional issues of mutual vulnerability that conservative (non-chaotic) politics would avoid; such awareness is required to tackle head-on the interconnected problems of racism, colonialism, and discrimination on the ground of gender, class, sexuality, belief systems. The nano-utopian moment recognises the fractured nature of temporality put forward by Bloch (2009), where we all exist in different ‘nows’ in this multi-layered temporality. A ‘collective good’ changes over time, and is not necessarily universalising but fractured and grassroots. We are motivated and influenced by different aspects of the past which means we construct differing utopian horizons, rather than a single universal ideal. An utopian horizon for Bloch is the concrete ideal we move towards, however, by describing it as a horizon the analogy means that we will (i) never reach it, (ii) it will always be changing as we approach it, and (iii) we will see it from differing perspectives depending on where we are and who we are.

While we can understand subjectivity to be inescapably collective, we do not necessarily have the same desires (Dunst and Edwards, 2011). What we think we move towards is an ever-changing horizon, change is the unique perspective different collective subjectivities bring to the table. Fundamentally, we will not all be aiming for the same utopian ideal, as such the nano-utopia moment need not aim to universalise change but to drive towards it for a particular group in a specific moment. While this may seem ‘outside’ of a linked up better world, Kinna (2016) notes such activity in anarchism, which “might support a variety of ends and means and might even remain indeterminate”, still prefigure utopian goals (p. 23).

Nano-utopian moments rail against threats to humanity in the now, in the sense of what it means to be or become human, and threats to the interconnected physicality of the human form as part of the eco-system on

which we depend and are destroying. Nano-utopian moments reflect how being and becoming are related aspects of our immediate reality (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). Thus, providing an alternative, for example, to the utopian literary tradition of science fiction which pre-empts resistance and suggests new lines of inquiries, rather than directly creating them in reality by encouraging us to “imagine what it would be like if they were true” (Shaviro, 2015, p. 9).

I recognise here that the idea of what it means in an utopian sense the process of being and becoming human is the matter of a far more complicated debate I am unable to cover here in detail. However, I would centre around notions of to recognise each other's vulnerabilities without exploiting them (Butler, 2004) and then to use that knowledge to reconfigure our ways of thinking and being with each other. Anticipation of a better world can be considered a form of resistance. There is a (sometimes spontaneous) transition process from the pre-conscious notion of the ideal ways to make collective improvement happen; to the material act of improving the world (the utopian process) revealing a populous who have indeed learned and relearned to hope across time. Thus, linking fictional utopias with the education of a nano-utopian process. Nano-utopian moments are the results of educated hope being present across communities, not as a new thing but as a part of being and becoming human.

Following the above politics, the logic of non-violent horizon of mutual vulnerability is part of this definition. This subscribes to Agnes Heller's idea that radical sudden transformation “[d]oes not need to be violent, and mostly it excludes violence” while it recognises that violence is in some cases inescapable (Heller and Auer, 2009, p. 100). Violence, from micro-aggressions to violent dispossession takes so many forms that perhaps is to say a striving towards non-violence is part of a nano-utopian moment, rather than non-violence itself. This may be impossible because the very words I write and the existence of the exclusionary academic textual

approach itself can be seen as violent, non-violent resistance can be a privilege, and utopia emerges from conflict. This inclusion is something that itself must be continuously critiqued and updated, and is placed here amongst all of this initial exploration of this category to be at the edge of contestation.

Judith Butler (2005) places ethics at the edge of the opacity of self-knowledge, therefore locating the possibility of ethics themselves. She notes that “morality is neither a symptom of its social conditions, nor a site of transcendence of them, but rather it is essential to the determination of agency and the possibility of hope” (p. 21). Implicit within this work is the utopian horizon that locating this ethical accountability can, therefore, make us more accountable to ourselves and responsible for each other. Through this, we get “our chance of becoming human” (p. 136). Examining the nano-utopian moment reveals reality and truth claims through “the active construction in which we participate” (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p. 293). In this sense, the nano-utopian moment is something produced by activists in the process of their actions. Within this self-organisation, there is increasing awareness of the process; participants realise the significance of what is happening to transform the anticipated ethics from violence to non-violence.

Case Study: The Umbrella Revolution (2014)

The peaceful sit-in street protest, the occupation referred to as the *Umbrella Revolution* in Hong Kong (26 September to 15 December 2014) would lead to the broader political Umbrella Movement. What I will elaborate on here is the complexity of the event and the nano-utopian moment of the occupation itself.

The utopian drive for the unplanned event was an improvised response against police violence to pro-democracy protests. The event was preceded by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress

(NPCSC) decision on 31 August 2014 to prescribe a selective pre-screening of candidates for the 2017 election of Hong Kong's chief executive, a measure seen as undermining the democratic reforms (Chan, 2014, p. 574). The occupation was the first radical act of civil disobedience in the Hong Kong democratic movement in thirty years (Loong-Yu, 2020). The political far-from-equilibrium situation was the collision between new policies and “Hong Kong’s new generation” which gave rise to the underlying tensions, that had been brewing for around ten years. The occupation itself resulted in the further-from-equilibrium situation where two pro-democracy protest events happened in close succession: the storming of Civic Square adjacent to the Central Government Offices (CGO) on 26 September and the firing of teargas in the crackdown on protestors on 28 September (Cheng and Chan, 2017; Chan, 2014).

We can find evidence of their singularity, which is emergent, unexpected, and accelerated. The storming of Civic Square was an improvised strategy by students, led by the Hong Kong Federation of Students and activist group Scholarism (Cheng and Chan, 2017; Barber, 2020). Students scaled the three-metre-high metal fence, intended to prevent protest, which had closed off the Civic Square from Tim Mei Avenue. Over 2000 protesters amassed outside Civic Square, which was eventually cleared by police by the end of the following day, with more than 60 people arrested (Barber, 2020; Cheng and Chan, 2017). Here, the nano-utopian moment is apparent in the unexpected acceleration of the movement.

There was no specific planning for the event as it happened. However, a group pre-empting the Umbrella Movement (led by two professors and a Baptist minister), called Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP), was driving the demands for rescission of the NPCSC, and had organised the protests in the 18 months leading up to the occupation (Cheng and Chan, 2017; Tsung-gan, 2017). The OCLP was “a pro-democracy civil disobedience campaign lacking a social base” (Cheng and Chan, 2017, p.

222). While there was the intention of the group to occupy on 1 October as a last resort, the lack of a social base for the OCLP made it an unlikely starting point for such a large occupation (ibid). OCLP plans accelerated, capitalising on the mass student presence, and on 28 September OCLP Founder Benny Tai, one of the founders of OCLP, announced a rally near the Central Government Complex (Tsung-gan, 2017).

Protests escalated, police blocked roads and bridges entering Tim Mei Avenue, and protestors called for citizens to come and encircle the police (Tsung-gan, 2017; Kaiman, 2014). Papers reported that the central business district was “a virtual conflict zone, replete with shouting mobs, police in riot gear, and clouds of tear gas. Tens of thousands of Hong Kong [...] peacefully occupied major thoroughfares across the city, shuttering businesses and bringing traffic to a halt.” (Kaiman, 2014). Footpaths could not contain large numbers of demonstrators; protestors piled onto roads stopping traffic at the junction of Tim Mei Avenue and Harcourt Road, matters escalated as police used pepper spray on protestors (Chan, 2014). Police returned to the peaceful occupation later that evening to disperse tear gas on the crowds (Cheng and Chan, 2017; Chan, 2014). The nano-utopian moment started as umbrellas raised in self-defence; Kong Tsung-gan cites this as the official moment the occupation began (Tsung-gan, 2017).

Researchers have noted the ideological politics of the peaceful occupation were a “series of improvised tactics responding to police repression was critical in realising the unintended yet spectacular occupation.” (Cheng and Chan, 2017, p. 228). The emergent nano-utopian moment is apparent in the improvised actions of the protestors. Peaceful and unarmed protesters protected themselves in groups with plastic goggles, facemasks and the iconic umbrellas; they dispersed but quickly regrouped, and used spontaneous approaches. The transition to a peaceful occupation shows a dramatic change in the spacio-temporality. It was moving from a situation that started as a violent conflict; there was a shift in its embodied

and emotional content, demonstrating a non-violent response ‘in the moment’ from the protesters.

There was a swift process of accelerated self-organisation. Cheng and Chan (2017) describe how “[i]mages of peaceful protestors using umbrellas to shield themselves from the attack of the coercive force soon spread through social media, facilitating rapid, massive self-mobilisation and resulting in an occupation spectacle” (pp. 223–224). The nano-utopian moment spatially was an online viral one which was part of the acceleration of the movement. The heavy-handed policing, including the use of tear gas on peaceful protesters, inspired tens of thousands of citizens to join the protests that evening in opposition to the violence. Exhaustion of the protestors highlighted by Chan (2014) mid-occupation shows that this is a “dissipative structure” taking more energy to maintain than to let go. Instances which included anti-occupy protestors attacking both protestors, journalists and tearing down tents, generated swells in numbers in the occupation. However, after a series of injunctions and declining public support due to the inconvenience caused police cleared protesters and their camps on 15 December ending this particular moment.

The utopian process is a risk, and this movement has not provided a stable pro-democratic order, perhaps there is no overarching success claim for the movement. While the protestors have had a non-violent approach, this has not protected them from a violent response. There are reports of China’s influence over Hong Kong growing since the Umbrella movement ended, with the press and freedom of expression stifled, new security laws, and pro-democracy activists being charged and jailed (Kuo and Hale, 2019; Kuo, 2020). Despite pandemic restrictions today (2020), hundreds of protestors met in June to mourn the death of Chow Tsz-Lok, 22, who died falling from a parking lot as police cleared crowds (Jim and Yiu, 2020).

Activism and the nano-utopian process in the umbrella occupation were mutually constitutive concepts. Much like the prefigurative anarchists,

they “participate in the present in the ways that they would like to participate, much more fully and with more self-determination in the future” (Milstein, 2010). The occupation demonstrated its potential to create a higher level of order from its chaos. This occurred within and beyond the movement by educating the public, sparking highly ordered resistance, and embedding an ethos of non-violence. One study noted the Umbrella Movement’s educational function, increasing the public’s understanding of civil disobedience (Lee, 2015). Public opinion is one example of how this new order is hard to undo and how what appears as entropy indeed reorders. Reports note “Hong Kong can’t go back to normal” following the protests, and in September 2019 thousands of peaceful protesters gathered to remember the fifth anniversary of the umbrella occupation (Kuo and Hale, 2019).

Protestors still use umbrellas both as a non-violent defence from ongoing police violence and as a symbol of the movement (Kuo and Hale, 2019). In Reverend Chu’s (leader of the OCLP) Umbrella Movement speech ahead of his sentencing, he stated that “[t]he seeds of peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience action have been planted deep in the heart of Hong Kong people” (HKFP, 2019). He believes it has made a fundamental change to the way at least some people in Hong Kong are thinking. The Umbrella Movement continued from this occupation and has been a prelude to the 2019 Hong Kong revolt, described as “full expression” of the 2014 events (Loong-Yu, 2020).

The occupation as the nano-utopian moment has been the beginning of many different non-violent acts of innovative resistance that continue today (Loong-Yu, 2020). These include attempts to destabilise via ‘the yellow economy’, a system of classifying Hong Kong businesses based ‘yellow’ or ‘blue’ on whether or not they supported the pro-democracy protests. Here protestors only use transport, restaurants and shops that they believe to be ‘yellow’ or pro-democracy; this has thought to have a significantly negative

impact on ‘blue’ businesses during the economic downturn of the pandemic (Beech, 2020; Su and McGill, 2020).

The nano-utopian process provides a different lens through which to view the Umbrella occupation. It demonstrates not just its historical lead-up and future influence but the explosive moment of the event itself, and the ordering relationship of what was a messy and unwieldy moment. Here the nano-utopian moment has converted the horizon to one of hope and non-violent resistance, from one of anger and dispossession. Such readings are intended, like other utopian approaches to activist analysis, to highlight the open character of history and its fundamental uncertainty, therefore the possibilities therein. Through using this category, we can start to view unexpected eruptions of non-violent activism as fundamentally constitutive of a better world.

Ordering Chaotic Horizons

It is the responsibility of utopian researchers to use knowledge, resources, and a collaborative process of memory and story-making to “generate a utopian vision that can help inform, guide, and mobilise long-term collective action for systemic change” (Webb, 2018, p. 109). Within this there must be a recognition of vulnerability, stories are not all the same, the nano-utopian aims to be part of this collaborative process, not to colonise with one story but to recognise multiple angles of disruption and agency. The Umbrella Movement is widely studied; however, moving forward, nano-utopia aims to encourage scholarship to look out for the smaller instances and acts. For example, a stage invasion at the National Union for Students’ conference, which ultimately resulted in democratic reform. Or how one panel refusing to attend a conference at Senate House (due to a protest for cleaning staff rights in the building) led to the unexpected reconvening of a whole Science Fiction conference outside of the building.

It may be too early to unravel nano-utopian moments in the current 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and anti-racism campaigns. The explosion of radical practices of care, artistic projects, distanced protests, and community activity lends themselves to such a framework keenly. We can examine examples of peaceful Black Lives Matter protests worldwide, initiated by the sharing of video of George Floyd's suffocating murder at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis. The global response demonstrates how in a far-from-equilibrium situation of a pandemic there can be a spontaneous self-organising over what was a disturbingly common event of the death a black man at the hands of a police officer in the US (York, 2020; Lee, 2020).

Chaotic times can allow inequalities to be laid bare and open paths for resistance, this is not easy, and peaceful resistance still meets with violence. We must recognise the political nature of violence itself and how it is embedded and inescapable part of peaceful resistance. However, if we set the utopian intent as a critical horizon of non-violence and are aware and accepting of our mutual vulnerability, we have a starting point. We can hope for a more just, compassionate and less violent and racist future. In the UK, Black Lives Matter protests originating from this one brutal report which exposed the horrors more broadly has contributed to a different order. While they are still in transition, this has given weight to UK debates of migrant rights on the Domestic Abuse Bill which is passing through parliament, and challenges to the Points Based Immigration System the government are introducing (Hansard, 2020a, 2020b). Here are examples of the nano-utopian moment and subsequent protest leading to consciousness-raising and a potential restructuring of what would have been laws that exclude people from protection disproportionately on the grounds of race and as such could do nothing but construct a racist future. The triggered nano-utopian moment has instead presented the opportunity to change the horizon to one of hope and resistance.

The nano-utopia aims to add to the importance of detecting and describing “utopian mechanisms to be found in the cultural productions which surround us [...] to recognise and foster utopian desire” (Fitting, 2007, p. 258). Standing both isolated and connected in the throng of the pandemic can itself create distortions of perspective, resulting in a careless wish fulfilment exercise of uncovering such nascent examples. However, the “here and now, what is repeatedly beginning in nearness, is a utopian category, in fact, the most central one” (Bloch, 1986, p. 12). This category of the nano-utopian moment is here as a reminder that we can be surprised by hope. The smallest signs of solidarity and collaboration we see around us could be the interconnected rumblings of a more significant change for the better, one that is already occurring in a way we can sense but not discern fully. It is a not a call to relax but to hope in tension in a world in chaos, to take the active role of Bloch’s militant optimist (1995) that makes material changes in the world as our responsibility, and not to wallow in. While the world around us seems chaotic, there is the possibility that small instances can prompt an optimistic ordering for a better and fairer future.

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